THE PLOT DOT

An eight-step visual guide to plotting
unforgettable fiction & writing a book readers love

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INTRODUCTION

Some people say the first million words you write are just practice. The moth-eaten Nanowrimo novel, the half-finished personal memoir or suspense thriller that stalled out in the middle, the fantasy fanfic that's tucked away in your desk to avoid embarrassment.

Most authors spend years on their first novel, agonizing over every detail, slogging through painful rewrites and edits, and get so sick of their book they never publish. Writing a book is one of the most challenging things the human brain is capable of, and while there are a lot of useful resources, most complicate the process instead of simplifying it.

And unfortunately, even when you finish a book that *you're* happy with, that doesn't necessarily mean that *readers* will enjoy it. It may be too slow or full of fluff; it may lose momentum or dramatic tension; readers may quit early because they don't trust that you're leading them towards a satisfactory ending.

When I first started writing fiction, I read all the plotting guides, outlining templates and books on writing craft I could get my hands on, and I still got stuck, moving around endless notecards trying to wrangle my plot into a sensible order.

Then I realized that most plotting resources based on the traditional three-act structure or hero's journey are broken. In the former, the second act is *half* the book and twice as long as the first and third act, but nobody tells you exactly what to put in the middle. In the latter, the hero dies at the midpoint and the second half of the book is his journey home.

And most books on craft get lost in the weeds, or focus on sentence structure and wordplay, which may be important for literary nonfiction but is unhelpful if you're trying to create a book readers enjoy reading and actually sells.

After months of procrastination, doubt and hard work, I discovered a much simpler, more intuitive method for outlining fiction that finally made everything make sense. I had to

move some things around towards the end to get a proper flow of events around the final battle scene, which increases tension and suspense.

As a former artist and book cover designer, I went a step further and added in exercises for creating visually powerful scenes that stick in people's minds. I've named my method *The Plot Dot* to symbolize the eight-step cycle of critical transition scenes that will help you craft an engaging novel for most commercial genres. It also refers to the flash of color you'll be using to cement and ground the core scene conflict into one totem item.

This book includes practical tools to help you organize your story quickly and unlock the potential in your scenes. It's filled with cheatsheets, outlines, and visual exercises that aim to make your key scenes stick in readers' minds. I've also included a free PDF workbook that you can download and print to help guide you through the plotting process step-by-step. For those who prefer learning by listening, there's a free YouTube video series that walks you through the main points, though I recommend reading this book first to get a solid understanding of the basics.

This book will help you:

- Organize your story so you can finish a great book, faster
- Unlock hidden potential in your scenes to maximize drama
- Hook readers faster so they don't quit too early
- Create vivid, striking scenes

"Fantastic book for any writer who wants to create sound, believable plotlines. Just made it to the top of my writing reference book list."

"I've read several books on writing plots and this is by far the best! The author makes it much easier to understand and create a bestselling plot."

"A ton of research distilled into a simple storytelling framework that works for any novel. You won't be disappointed no matter how long you've been writing."

Praised by writers for its clarity and practicality, *The Plot Dot* is here to transform how you approach writing your novels. It's a straightforward, no-nonsense guide designed to make plotting as pain-free as possible, helping you move from initial idea to polished manuscript more efficiently. With *The Plot Dot*, your journey from a struggling novelist to a published author is about to become a whole lot smoother and more enjoyable.

Introduce Your Project!

Brainstorm some general ideas about this book project, including the genre, premise or theme, setting or core conflict.

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ASSEMBLE YOUR CAST

Before we begin outlining your novel, let's spice up your characters. You don't have to use all of these, but strong supporting characters make for a much richer, more complex story. These are the most common characters found in commercial fiction. See if you can give them a unique look, a simple backstory to fuel their motivation, and an unusual habit. Personally I don't do major questionnaires for each character, because the majority of commercial fiction is more plot based than character based.

You want a satisfying story arch for your main protagonist (the one who changes the most through the events of the story), but getting the eight plot points in place is more important than figuring out what kind of toothbrush they use or the name of the puppy that died when they were three.

The Protagonist

The protagonist, or the hero of your story, should be visually distinct and easily recognizable. Consider their physical features: Are there scars that tell a story of past battles or struggles? How do their clothing choices reflect their personality—perhaps practical and rugged for an adventurer, or sleek and sophisticated for a city-dwelling detective? A meaningful object they carry might be a family heirloom, symbolizing their heritage or motivation. The flash of color could be a vibrant scarf or a unique hair streak, serving as a visual hallmark of their character.

The Antagonist

The main villain or opposing force should have an appearance that contrasts with the protagonist to highlight their differences. This character's clothing might be imposing, designed to intimidate; think dark colors, sharp lines, or militaristic details. Their meaningful object could be something that represents their power or malice, like a dark amulet or a weapon of significance. The flash of color here could be something like a blood-red tie or glowing eyes, which sets them apart visually and hints at their malevolence.

The Best Friend(s)/Ally

Often, the protagonist's allies include a balanced mix of characters—perhaps one is upbeat and colorful while the other is more reserved and subtle. Their appearances should complement their personalities; for instance, the cheerful friend might wear bright, mismatched clothes, while the more serious one could favor muted, practical outfits. Each might carry an object that ties to their backstory or skills, like a musical instrument or a notebook. Their flashes of color—like a hat, belt, or piece of jewelry—help tie their visual themes to their roles in the story.

The Romantic Interest(s)

If the romantic interests are from contrasting backgrounds or ideologies, their appearances should reflect these differences. One could appear more refined and orderly, perhaps in uniform or formal wear, while the other might be wild and free-spirited, adorned in loose, natural fabrics. Each might carry an object that is emblematic of their values or origins—a locket or a compass, for example. Their flash of color should be tied to their emotional or thematic significance in the story, such as a rose pin or a blue pendant.

The Mentor

This character, often older and wiser, should have an appearance that exudes wisdom and experience. Their attire might be more traditional or scholarly, possibly with glasses, a walking stick, or shawl. The object they carry could be a book, a map, or a tool used for teaching or crafting. Their flash of color could be in the form of a classic watch or a distinctive ring, symbolizing their knowledge and the passage of time.

The Nemesis

A nemesis isn't outright evil but is an obstacle to the protagonist. This character's appearance could be authoritative or slightly menacing—a strict uniform for a teacher or polished, corporate attire for a workplace rival. They might carry an object like a whistle, a clipboard, or a briefcase. Their flash of color could be something like a tie or glasses that mark their authority but also their personal style.

The Gang

This group of secondary characters should have varying appearances that reflect their contrasting personalities. A skeptical character might wear guarded, closed-off clothing, while an emotional one could favor soft, flowing fabrics. Each member's flash of color should match their personality trait, like a skeptic's gray hat or an emotional character's bright yellow shoes.

The Obstacles

When depicting obstacles as monsters or non-sentient challenges, their design should visually communicate the threat. Sharp angles, dark colors, and large, looming shapes can

convey danger. The flash of color, perhaps in the eyes or on the claws, can draw attention to the most threatening aspects.

Non-human Roadblocks

Major natural obstacles or forces should be visually imposing. If depicting a storm, swirling dark clouds with streaks of lightning can visually represent the danger. For an animal attack, the creature's eyes or markings could serve as the flash of color that highlights its role as an obstacle.

By adding these details, each character or obstacle in your story will not only carry visual weight but also offer deeper connections to the narrative, enhancing the reader's engagement and the vividness of your world.

Adding Character Depth

If you want your characters to seem realistic, you can avoid flat characters by adding some of these. Giving them beliefs, goals and hard limits will also boost conflict, drama and motivation.

- what they look like
- how they dress
- a unique hobby or habit
- their core beliefs
- their domain
- an object they treasure
- something they love / hate
- one thing they'd never do

- a hidden skill or ability
- what they want (right now & maybe later)

I recommend making character cards to keep track of the details. You can draw these out yourself or use an art program or stock photos.

Add Some Characters!

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PLOT YOUR BOOK

My eight-point "Plot Dot" formula may seem similar to other 3-Act structures, but there are key distinctions. After reading dozens of books on plotting, I was still confused. What's the difference between the first plot point and the inciting incident? If they're the same, then nothing at all happen for the first 25% of the book (which is boring). How about the second plot point and final battle—simple fiction plotting graphs lump them together under "climax" but each offers a unique and critical event.

Understanding this was a huge breakthrough for me, and it finally let me map out a story that worked, but it may be different from what you'll learn about plotting elsewhere.

When I first posted this writing resource online, it upset some writers who rejected the idea that every story should follow a hero's journey. One writer said, "I reject your picture and decide to be creative." Another said, "I need structure? I just want to write."

But the truth is most commercial fiction has a predictable plot structure, and most books that fail to capture readers' imaginations are often missing these key plot points. This is about structuring your main character's story arc so it generates momentum and builds to a satisfying resolution: a great story forces the protagonist to change, through an impossible quest.

Experienced pantsers (people who write by the scene of their pants) can go scene by scene and work their way to the end, but especially if you're working on your first novel, having a little structure can really help you reach the finish line. Hitting these 8 crucial plot points is an easy way to make sure your story is balanced.

Think of structure as training wheels—they'll help you map out the broad strokes, in roughly the right place for maximum emotional impact, based on cues readers have come to expect after consuming thousands of books and movies. This doesn't stop you from being

creative, though it will probably prevent months of feeling stuck and frustrated. This is a system that has worked for many authors, and it's based on tons of research, but if it doesn't work for you or it feels constrictive, you're free to try something else.

That said, be wary about your resistance. There are two kinds of creative production; the one where you map it all out and fill in the blanks, and the one where you stumble into the unknown, lost and blind, and revelations appear like magic. The second one is intrinsically more satisfying, because it feels like you're tapping into a higher universal power, and it may be more fun.

But it's a mistake to assume that because you enjoy writing it, readers will enjoy reading it; or that because one method feels "natural" and "easy" to you, plotting is unnecessary. Writing a good book is hard work, and spending a day outlining it from the beginning is better than spending months trying to fix your broken, haphazard story or cutting out chapters of useless fluff and padding.

The eight major plot points are the biggest, most powerful scenes in your novel, the bones of the structure. As long as you get these eight points right, your story will have a strong foundation. You can go back and fill in the details and description in editing later.

The average novel is around 70,000 words, so shoot for 5k to 10k for each major segment. I write two scenes per chapter, and keep my chapters around 3,000 words, so my books have roughly 24 chapters (three chapters for each section). Each scene will end with the twist, reveal or change, because the mini cliffhangers or "open loops" will keep readers turning pages to find out what happens next.

If you choose to draw these scenes out, like I recommend, don't worry about making it pretty. Use stick figures if you have to. This is just a visual reference to help you write faster, better stories. Nobody else has to see it. If you're not comfortable drawing, you can cut out

pictures from magazines and make a collage; or you can even hire someone to illustrate these for you, which will make for excellent bonus content you can offer your readers later.

Plot: things that happen in a restricted period of time. Something big has a major impact on the protagonist, that challenges them in unique and unfamiliar ways, forcing them to change, learn and grow. If they are *able* to make this change, they may find success, but it should be harder than anything they've ever faced before, and threaten their entire identity.

Here's a very simple framework:

- Beginning: knocked off course.
- Middle: forced to fight.
- End: sacrifice to win.

But in order for that to matter, we have to first prove to readers that the stakes are real. We have to show why this quest was necessary and unavoidable. And we have to sprinkle in conflict, suspense and intrigue to keep it interesting. The 8-point guide to major plot events gives you the space and support to tell the best version of your story.

THE
PLOT
DOT
ORDINARY
WORLD
(start with lack)
INCITING
INCIDENT
(call to adventure)
1ST PLOT
POINT
(point of no return)
1ST PINCH
POINT
(first battle)
MIDPOINT
(shift from victim to warrior)
2ND PINCH
POINT
(second battle)
2ND PLOT
POINT
(dark night of soul)
FINAL
BATTLE
(triumph-knowledge)
THE
ESSENTIAL
SCENES
IN EVERY
STORY

Ordinary World (start with lack)

The first few chapters of your novel will set up your main character (MC) in their ordinary, mundane environment. You'll introduce their friends and family members, their home, school or workplace, in the first few chapters. But you need to show what's missing. You don't want to start with a perfect, happy character who has everything (unless you're going to take it all away, which is fine). You need to give them space to grow. Maybe they have unresolved emotional issues. They're probably shy, awkward, clumsy or embarrassed, or unpopular. Maybe they hate their job or just got dumped. You need to show what they want, their secret desires. What are they working towards? They probably have daydreams about things they don't think will ever happen.

This is also your chance to make your main character sympathetic. For your story to matter, the protagonist needs to be likeable—or readers won't care what happens to them—and their quest or journey should be difficult and force them to become a larger version of themselves.

In some genres, the MC may be a shy wallflower who will blossom into a heroic force for good, growing confidence through the events of the story. In other genres, the MC is *already* a fierce, confident warrior, but the events of the story will tear apart their status quo and force them to recover their bearing.

If you are attempting to build a vast universe with many characters, you may have a lot of irrelevant content that readers don't care about. Most of the time, all of that worldbuilding only resonates if it's supporting the main story, and if you don't have a likeable protagonist with a specific, personal mission, it all falls apart.

Here are some quick ways to make sure readers love your protagonist quickly.

- quirky habits
- self-consciousness
- getting bullied
- being brave or clever
- standing up for someone weaker
- saving pets, children or elderly
- burdened with problems & responsibilities
- unique hobby, style or totem
- fatal flaw, fear or lack (shard of glass)

You don't want to make them *too* powerful in the beginning, because the conflict, challenges and dangers must actually be difficult and threatening.

There should also be action right away. It's generally a mistake to start with a flashback, dream or backstory that begins years ago then skips forward. I've done that occasionally with a preface, but only when I need to add some carnage so readers know the stakes are high, so they'll stick with the first few slower chapters before the inciting incident.

You may have a series of unfortunate incidents, minor conflict and problems, or general weirdness. It gives your character pause, but they are committed to their original path, quest or goals. They want to stay in the ordinary world, because it's safe and comfortable.

The ordinary world is also where you establish the rules and status quo? What's *normal*? What are the rules? Give your protagonist some critical, pressing needs and tasks, to show them interacting and demonstrate their character. I recommend starting on a "very bad day"—when their hopes are crushed. This will allow them to be open to new, unsafe choices.

Action Steps: Begin on a pivotal day in your protagonist's life. Perhaps they are preparing for a significant event or already facing challenges that highlight their fears. Use this as an opportunity to showcase the world and its unique culture. Establish a connection with readers by illustrating the protagonist's sympathetic and kind nature, while also showing how they are oppressed or repressed, setting up a strong emotional hook.

Start on a "big day"

- preparing for an important event
- already facing fears and challenges
- demonstrate the world and culture
- hook with sympathy & kindness

Describe Your Protagonist's Normal (But Interesting) Day

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw the ordinary world, surrounding your main character. How is their environment a reflection of their inner flaw? What is their favorite object? Where is the flash of color? Where are the sources of conflict?

Inciting Incident (call to adventure)

In some books, the inciting incident should actually happen in chapter one or two, but otherwise try to keep it at around 12% (as long as you have enough interesting conflict to get readers through the first few chapters). It's an intrusion on the ordinary world. Something big changes. Maybe a stranger moves to town, or a family member dies, or there's an earthquake. It might be an invitation, or a friend inviting your MC to a party. It can't be a huge crisis, but it will be annoying and noticeable, or exciting—it's the beginning of your plot. It's the first significant change, where the extraordinary world makes its appearance.

If you're writing contemporary romance, it could be where she meets the smirking asshole who gets her flustered. If you're writing a personal memoir, it's the incident that forced you on your path. Even if there isn't one, clear incident, you need to frame it as if there is. In a thriller or mystery, it's probably the first murder, crime or mysterious accident; though often these will be shown in a preface, and chapter one begins with the detective arriving on scene.

You want to get the ball rolling pretty early, otherwise nothing will be happening. Avoid writing a lot of history, backstory or worldbuilding. Start your book as near to the inciting incident as you can. But don't think of it as just one scene or chapter.

The "call to adventure" is usually followed by denial or refusal. The MC doesn't trust it, or doesn't want to make a decision. They'll ignore it and continue focusing on their previous goals. They just want things to go back to normal.

Action Steps: Introduce something unusual and unforgettable that disrupts the protagonist's normal life. This could be a mysterious event, a sudden disaster, or an unexpected invitation that pulls them towards a new, unknown world. This incident should challenge the status

quo, potentially leading to failure or imbalance, and opening a path that the protagonist feels compelled, yet hesitant, to follow.

Something weird or unexpected

- doesn't fit into "normalcy"
- unusual and hard to forget
- points towards an unknown world or conflict
- threatens status quo
- an invitation or offer
- possibly puts the character off balance
- might be responsible for bitter failure
- a path opens...

Describe Your First Incident

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- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw the Inciting Incident. What object symbolizes the event and deepens character? How does the setting reflect the mood of the conflict? What's remarkable and novel about the character and their setting? Where is the flash of color?

1st Plot Point (point of no return)

Things have been getting weirder and/or more intriguing for several chapters. Your MC tries to ignore the problems but they keep interfering with their normal agenda. They get roped in, and something happens that forces them into the action. Everything changes, and there's no going back to the ordinary world.

They might have met a teacher, or they might have seen something that changes their perspective: a revelation of supernatural abilities; a murder or death; an accident or robbery or attack or disaster. Something pretty big, that shatters what they thought they understood of the world, and makes them feel vulnerable and exposed. This will be one of the major scenes in your book, so make it unforgettable.

Also, this is the end of Act One, about 25% of your book—by now all the major characters should have already been introduced, or at least hinted at (the main antagonist is sometimes veiled until towards the end, but the 1st Plot Point should be a result of the main antagonist's schemes, or involve his henchmen or goons.)

In a romance, this may be where the protagonist is forced into close proximity with the love interest. In thriller or mystery, this may be where the protagonist takes the case or is personally motivated to find the culprit. In a fantasy or science fiction novel, this is often literally a change of setting and the beginning of a brand new adventure into a mysterious and unfamiliar world.

It's not usually a deliberate choice: the protagonist must be forced onto this journey. The door to the ordinary world is closed. A storm has brought Dorothy to Oz. Harry Potter goes to Hogwarts. Circumstances need to make this event either the only option, or whisk your MC away without their permission.

Action Steps: Force the protagonist to engage with the unusual elements introduced earlier, stepping into a new reality from which there is no return. This might involve losing their way back to normalcy, or realizing that they can no longer ignore the changes around them. They may face hesitation or outright refusal to proceed, underscoring the gravity of their new circumstances.

Can't ignore the weirdness

- steps into the unknown (often forced)
- the way back is lost
- doesn't know the rules or what's happening
- normalcy is broken; the new world takes over
- hesitation or refusal

Describe Your 1st Plot Point

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- _____

Draw the 1st Plot Point. This is your protagonist stepping off the cliff, or going into the rabbit hole. It may not be a physical change of location. What object symbolizes this transition? How does the environment reflect the inner change? What flash of color conveys the mood?

1st Pinch Point *(first battle)*

After the 1st Plot Point, there will be several chapters where the protagonist is learning about the new world. They might be doing research, or discovering things in conversations. There needs to be conflict and tension, but there can also be some fun or light scenes. The First Pinch Point is a stark reminder about the dangers and stakes.

This doesn't have to be a literal battle, but it is the first major interaction with the antagonist's forces. The villain might not be visible yet, but they should be the one wielding the strings. The antagonist is after something, and that something is often tied to the MC somehow. Maybe the antagonist wants something the protagonist has, or needs the protagonist to do something, or has a score to settle.

The MC probably still has no idea what's happening, but they find themselves at the center of some conflict. They probably don't win this incident, but they do survive. Now the stakes are clear. You should make them as dire as possible, almost inconceivable. Ask yourself, what's the worst thing that could happen? Then ask, how can I make it even worse for my protagonist?

The stakes should always seem life and death to the protagonist… they represent a complete change, the "death" of the former self, which is why the MC resists them. If your protagonist doesn't have their self-identity shaken to its roots, you need to make this scene bigger.

This scene will also test their loyalty and conviction: so far they've been slowly making friends or allies, but may yearn for the simple, less scary life they left behind. This First Pinch Point is a revelation that this new, interesting world could all be swept away and destroyed.

In a romance, it could be the arrival of an ex-girlfriend or protective mother that ups the conflict and tension. In a memoir, it could be the dire challenges and stakes that make the

new dream or path seem impossible. It can be a major setback for the main character that makes them question whether this new life or world is worth the effort.

It will probably spark additional conflict, and some big reveals. It might prompt questions and discovery; either other characters fill the MC in on the backstory that led to the event, or the MC is hunting down clues and trying to figure out what actually happened and what was behind it.

Action Steps: Confront the protagonist with the real dangers of the antagonist's influence. This is where they encounter direct opposition, revealing the larger forces at play. Their survival may thwart the antagonist's plans temporarily, making them a target, deepening the mystery of the antagonist's motives, and forcing the protagonist to choose sides. This point should also highlight the protagonist's courage or expose their weaknesses.

The stakes are real

- dangerous opposition
- the larger forces at play
- the antagonist makes a move
- survive, thwart the antagonist, become a target
- deepens the mystery (what were they after?)
- show off courage or weakness
- forced to choose sides

Describe Your First Battle

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Draw the 1st Pinch Point. This is the first major interaction with the antagonist or the forces of evil. It demonstrates what's at stake. What can you add to make the setting reflect the mood? What can you add to make it epic? What can you add to deepen character? Where is the flash of color? What's remarkable about the setting?

Midpoint (shift from victim to warrior)

After the 1st Pinch Point, the protagonist continues to face new challenges, but they are in a defensive role. They might be making some plans, but mostly they're waiting for something to happen and reacting to events or circumstances beyond their control. If they try to solve any issue, they end up making things even worse. They might accidentally hurt someone, or their friends and family begin to fear and distrust them (because they have secrets now).

They begin questioning their identity and world view, which leads to a personality crisis and a shift in perspective. About halfway through the novel, the protagonist decides to take action. They make a deliberate choice to stop being a victim and reacting to events, and vow to do whatever it takes to win.

They'll probably form a new goal, and even if they aren't sure how to achieve it yet, they'll feel a deep conviction towards it. This might be based in rage or anger towards the antagonist, a newfound perspective of the moral dilemma, a desire to protect their new allies, or increased self-confidence.

The midpoint is often prompted by a big reveal or new information: a shocking discovery or revelation that forces some heavy doubt, fear and introspection. The midpoint is a good place to reveal who the antagonist is and what their plans are (or at least guess, even if it turns out they were wrong and there's actually someone else behind everything).

They will have put together enough information to at least try to take action and do something to stop the incidents, attacks or conflict that will otherwise continue to occur. It may be information about their new allies or the world they find themselves in, which could breed distrust or conflict.

In a romance, this may be where the protagonist realizes she has feelings for the love interest. In a memoir, this is where the protagonist decides they've had enough and makes a

conscious decision to change their life or grab the reins; or a major revelation that forces them to change their personal behavior and start mending fences.

Now they know *what's at stake*, and that warrants reflection, some soul-searching, and a response. This is a critical turning point where the protagonist shifts from being passive to taking active control. It often involves an identity crisis, or a major revelation that changes their perspective. The protagonist may discover the full extent of the antagonist's plans and, despite understanding the risks, commits to the cause. This commitment could be driven by personal stakes, such as vengeance or profound ethical reasons.

Shift from victim to warrior

- deep self-reflection
- identity crisis / shift in perspective
- shocking reveal
- what have I become?
- antagonist's plans revealed
- committed to the cause (even knowing risks)
- takes an active role, even if not a true believer
- personal vengeance

Describe Your Midpoint

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Draw the midpoint. This could even literally be the protagonist looking at themselves in a mirror, wondering who they've become. So far they've been refusing their quest. But now they're pissed off. They decide to fight back. What object symbolizes that shift? Where's the flash of color? What's remarkable about the setting?

2nd Pinch Point *(second battle)*

After the midpoint, the protagonist will make a plan of action, which will bring them into a second confrontation with the antagonist's forces. This probably won't be deliberate: smart characters will try to avoid unnecessary danger, but they will be taking action to thwart the antagonist and find themselves in direct confrontation. The protagonist will probably have a crucial role in this plan, so that when it goes wrong—which it will—they can feel guilty and responsible.

The second pinch point may still not reveal the main antagonist; it could just be henchmen that represent the main villain's interests. It could be an attack, or it could be an unfortunate result of the MC taking action, often due to lack of information. Maybe the MC sets a trap for the antagonist to force them into the open, or perhaps it's the villain that sets a trap for the MC, for example by kidnapping a friend or relative.

The protagonist is determined to see this plan through, even if the chances of success are slim, because sitting around and doing nothing is no longer an option. You'll have had to establish the stakes and the MC's motivations enough by now so that the consequences of doing nothing are inescapable, and doing *anything* is better than waiting for the antagonist to complete his evil plan.

In many cases, the conflict erupts into an open battle, with escalating consequences; or it could just be something really bad that happens, as a result of the antagonist's actions. This confrontation makes the protagonist realize that everything is much worse than they thought, and they realize they've underestimated the antagonist's power.

They rally with new determination, and might even score a seeming victory… but generally this episode is a defeat, where an ally gets hurt or even killed.

In a romance, the MC runs to confess her feelings but finds her love interest with another woman, or hears some devastating rumor about him. In a memoir, this is a single point of

failure—even after deciding to take action and step towards their true desire, the protagonist's deficiencies are brought into high contrast.

This event might reveal the MC's 'fatal flaw'—a fear, belief, or character defect that is holding them back. The Bible puts it this way: "Hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly how to remove the splinter from your brother's eye."

The failure is due in part to a lack of information or a flawed understanding, which forces some deep introspection, regret, confusion and hopelessness. It was necessary, to draw this lack or deficiency into the open, though it won't be healed or overcome until later.

In a thriller or mystery, they may realize the person they locked up was not the real culprit, and their mistake left the real killer to strike again closer to home. Or the antagonist may have tricked them by planting a fake clue, and they arrive at the wrong location while the real attack is underway somewhere else.

Something that often works well, is to start with a short preface or intro to *this* scene; showing them at their worst, lowest point, to capture attention and hook engagement, then back up and tell the story up to this point.

RECAP: The narrative escalates with the protagonist suffering heavy losses. They take decisive but perhaps reckless actions that lead to a catastrophic failure. This battle is a critical confrontation with the antagonist's forces, leading to guilt, remorse, and new complications that worsen the protagonist's situation, testing their resolve and pushing them to their emotional limits.

Heavy Losses

- take (sneaky) action
- everything falls apart

- unexpected conflict with antagonist's forces
- critical failure, personal responsibility
- guilt and remorse
- new information that makes everything much worse

Describe Your 2nd Pinch Point

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- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw the 2nd Pinch Point. In this scene, the antagonist defeats the protagonist's forces, or foreshadows what's at stake in the next major encounter. What object symbolizes the danger and conflict? Where's the flash of color? What is remarkable about the setting?

2nd Plot Point (dark night of the soul)

Often, the conflict in the 2nd Pinch Point sets the stage for an even bigger conflict in the 2nd Plot Point. They realize they've made a mistake, then rush to figure out the truth and stop the antagonist before it's too late. But because they *still* haven't resolved their fatal flaw, this new plan fails as well.

The secret weapon backfired. The hero's team was slaughtered, or they lost their one advantage, or the AC's evil plan succeeded and the worst has happened. The antagonist has

won, and all is lost. Alternatively, the 2nd Plot Point can be elevated conflict, followed by MC reaction. Maybe the antagonist has stolen something or kidnapped an ally. They rally the troops, and try fix things, but things keep getting worse and worse, leading to a total, devastating loss. Usually this process happens over several chapters. But at the 2nd Plot Point, everything the MC feared could happen, has happened. They are destroyed. They cannot win. They give up. There's no hope.

They lose the battle, with serious consequences. Someone the protagonist cares gets hurt, and the MC feels crushing guilt. Usually the failure is due to their character flaw or a lack of knowledge (which they may have discovered earlier, but been unwilling or unable to resolve).

This marks a period of depression, prompting a change in mindset. Often the MC has to give up what they want. They realize that the thing they've been holding on to (sometimes it's just wanting to get back to the ordinary world, back to normal) is completely gone. There is no chance for victory. The only way forward is through, which means letting go of whatever has been holding them back. They are forced to change and go in a new direction. When they figure out their own limitations, and when they're prepared to sacrifice what they want (giving up personal goals or desires for the greater good) they finally become the hero they need to be to defeat the villain. This won't actually happen until later, but the seeds should be planted here.

RECAP: All seems lost here; the protagonist may give up, overwhelmed by the apparent futility of their efforts. Any secret plans or weapons backfire, the antagonist appears to have won, and the protagonist blames themselves for the villain's successes. This is the lowest point, marked by self-pity or self-destructive behaviors, potentially leading to conflicts with

allies. A pivotal pep-talk or revelation from a trusted friend or mentor might reignite their resolve.

All hope is lost

- hero gives up; doesn't see a way forward
- their secret plan or weapon backfired
- loses a piece of their heart or self-identity
- antagonist has taken everything
- the hero is responsible for the villain's success
- serious losses or casualties
- escalating stakes have led to greater losses
- self-pity or self-destructive behavior
- fights or arguments

Describe Your 2nd Plot Point

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

- _____

Draw the 2nd Plot Point. This is the second major interaction with the antagonist… the protagonist knew this was coming, and thought they were somewhat prepared, but they were wrong. Make this scene heart-wrenching by taking something permanent from them or one of their allies (destroyed house, lost limb, a death…). What object focuses the scene? What object does your MC cling to afterwards, as a reminder?

Final Battle (triumph-knowledge)

After the devastating loss, usually the MC needs a pep talk from a close friend or ally, to "gird the loins." Or it could be a memory or previous piece of advice that now takes on a whole new meaning, as they finally understand the context and recognize that they can't get everything they want. They need a reason to resist, even if it's hopeless, and even if they don't see how to defeat the enemy.

There's no choice but to confront them. But now (they think) they are prepared—they might have gained a valuable piece of knowledge or information. They might have been given a new weapon or power, or learned the villain's weakness. Or they might find that just by going into battle on faith, whatever they need materializes in the critical moment.

But they don't triumph right away. Even this battle, they lose.

The final battle scene often includes a "hero at the mercy of the villain" scene, where the hero is caught, so the villain can gloat and fill in story holes (or this can come earlier, just before the 2nd Plot Point). Anyway it's not a clear, easy victory. They fail at first, all is lost, the hero is captured, the enemy gloats, then the hero perseveres… usually simply by not giving up.

The middle of the final battle scene is the best place for your full backstory reveal: whatever trauma or past event made them who they are, finally gets a closer and detailed treatment, as they fully realize what that incident cost them. This is the only time it really matters, when it is *necessary* to reinterpret their past, leading to new understanding and a holistic sense of purpose.

And even then, there's a pulling, tearing, slow-motion tension where the outcome is still up in the air, when it seems like it could go either way. This is your peak drama, this is the point of the book, so slow it down. If you have multiple main characters, make sure each of

them has a unique role and purpose here; they were *all* necessary, and only with all their powers combined can they triumph.

Ideally, this victory should be unexpected, because it was so difficult the chance of success seemed impossible. They are often aided by last minute help from an unlikely ally, who is won over to the protagonist's side by good deeds or kindness shown earlier. The hero wins because of who they are, not any innate powers, skills or abilities… although those can help, they aren't the only thing.

With resolve and tenacity, the hero escapes and overpowers the villain. Often the final battle scene also includes a "death of the hero" scene, where the hero, or an ally/romantic interest, sacrifices themselves, and appears to die… but then is brought back to life in joy and celebration. Or if you want to keep it dark, just have them die, so the victory will be bittersweet (this is OK for side-characters, but your protagonist should nearly always survive. If the villain won, readers will feel cheated—what was even the point?)

This doesn't have to be a literal "battle." It's just the last, final straw, the most dramatic part of your story. It's what forces the MC to make a realization, change or grow. And it's the place where the MC finally overcomes their fatal flaw, discovers that they already have all the knowledge and skills they need to triumph, and defeats the villain. If this is the first book in a series, the antagonist here could be a smaller villain, or the real antagonist could get away to fight again another day.

RECAP: In the climax, the protagonist must risk everything against seemingly insurmountable odds. They might discover the true nature of the antagonist or a critical weakness, facing ultimate defeat before a surprising twist—a sacrifice, an unlikely ally's help, a newfound power, or sheer determination—allows them to prevail. This battle is not just a test of strength but of heart and intellect.

Sacrifice to win

- an ally gives them a pep-talk
- risks all, despite likely doom
- slim chance at success
- the true antagonist or plan is revealed
- enemy's weakness discovered
- their one hope is taken, the plan fails
- hero at mercy of villain
- the protagonist alone must persevere
- saved by act of sacrifice, unlikely ally, new knowledge or power, or refusal to quit

Describe Your Final Battle

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw the Final Battle. The antagonist if fully revealed. The protagonist rides off to meet their fate. At first they fail, and are captured—all seems lost, but in a sudden twist, the protagonist reaches into themselves and finds the motivation and tenacity to persevere, unlocking access to their secret weapon, and defeating the antagonist.

Return to Ordinary (completion of journey)

You'll probably want another chapter or two where the hero returns to the ordinary world, now changed. They've won the battle, though it's probably temporary (this villain was defeated, but he or someone new will return). The safety is short-lived and bittersweet. The hero once again faces the small challenges or bullies that appeared at the beginning of the story, but they seem trivial and unimportant now in comparison.

The hero is no longer lacking; they've grown in confidence, and now have a group of new friends, and a new hope for the future. This can also be the place where you fill in final plot holes by having the characters sit down and talk to each other, filling in the gaps (previously, you want to avoid friendly conversations because they kill suspense and tension).

If this is the first book in a series, be careful about wrapping things up too neatly. End on a cliffhanger or open loop, or at least hint at a future threat or have a final vignette of the defeated antagonist plotting revenge.

RECAP: The protagonist returns home profoundly changed by their experiences. This section contrasts their new self with who they were at the beginning, reflecting on losses and future challenges. It's a time for melancholic reflection but also for resolving any remaining mysteries or plot holes. The new status quo should reflect their growth—from isolation to community support, from fear to empowerment, possibly even confronting and overcoming past bullies or adversaries.

How far we've come…

- the hero returns home changed
- contrast their earlier self
- reflect on what's been lost

- show the challenges ahead
- melancholic reflection
- fill in plot holes or open loops (mysteries)
- it could be a *new* home or status quo
- from alone to supported
- from afraid/weak to powerful
- standing up to former bullies

Describe Your Ending

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw the Return to Ordinary. The antagonist has been defeated, but the protagonist is forever changed. What have they lost? What have they gained? What object(s) symbolize those things? Where is the flash of color?

FILLING THE GAPS

These detailed plot points provide the framework for building a dynamic and emotionally engaging narrative, so you can craft stories that resonate deeply with your readers. They are the most important bits, and will probably be the most dramatic and impactful, which is why you should really focus on what happens and how they look.

Once you have your eight basic turning points, you'll be able to write forward to the next big event or reveal. This will keep your momentum moving forward. But you still need to figure out what happens in between each event. Down below we'll take a closer look at the three major acts, and there's some space to brainstorm what might happen *between* these critical scenes.

Each act serves a distinct purpose and needs careful crafting to ensure that the narrative flows smoothly and keeps the reader engaged throughout. By plotting your scenes carefully and ensuring that each contributes to the overall arc of the story, you can create a cohesive and compelling narrative.

If you get stuck, I mapped out a more advanced 24-chapter template, which will help especially for the middle sections which can get too slow.

Mapping it out *(Act One)*

Act One serves as the foundation of your story, establishing the world and propelling your protagonist into the central conflict. This act typically includes 6 to 10 chapters and should account for roughly 25% of your narrative, meticulously setting up the dominoes that will cascade throughout the rest of your story.

The most important thing here is to grab readers' attention, without giving them any backstory infodumps or getting distracted. Hook with action, suspense and intrigue, with love and fear (characters they care about, dealing with difficult challenges, in an interesting environment).

Ordinary World: Begin by painting a vivid picture of the protagonist's everyday life. This is where you build empathy and set the stage for the forthcoming disruption. Highlight the protagonist's daily challenges and the cultural nuances of their world. Use a significant "big day" event to introduce the routine that will soon be disrupted. Whether it's the protagonist preparing for a major competition, dealing with family dynamics, or facing a personal fear, these early scenes are crucial for establishing the stakes and the protagonist's initial state of lack or need.

Inciting Event: Introduce an event that disrupts the normalcy of the protagonist's world. This could be a mysterious message, a sudden tragedy, or an unexpected encounter. It should be compelling, leaving both the protagonist and the reader with a sense of curiosity and urgency. This event should also introduce the main theme of the story, posing a question or challenge that will echo throughout the narrative.

Progression of Challenges: As the protagonist begins to grapple with the initial disruption, layer in additional complications. These might include a moral dilemma, an embarrassing situation, or a confrontation that forces the protagonist to reveal a personal secret. Each challenge should escalate the stakes and deepen the reader's investment in the character's journey.

First Plot Point and Commitment: Conclude Act One with a decisive turning point where the protagonist makes a significant choice or realization that there is no turning back. This is often a moment of acceptance of the quest or a commitment to a new goal, driven by the events that have unfolded. It sets the trajectory for Act Two and solidifies the story's direction.

Here are some of the things that often happen in the first act:

- An event that creates desire or longing
- Another character asks a question that becomes a theme
- A moral dilemma
- Something embarrassing
- Character realizes external goal
- Attempts to fulfill their longing or need.
- What goal does character take action to reach?
- Call to adventure/refuses quest
- Display of flaw
- Reveals a piece of themselves
- Meets with mentor
- Takes action towards goal
- They can’t get what they want, so they change their plan
- Antagonist revealed
- Point of no return, accepts quest and commits to goal
- A problem grows out of character weakness
- New drive for goal
- What plan does the antagonist have to reach goal?

Visualize your scenes. It's fine to have something that's just really cool, but make sure you're also including a lot of tension and conflict, and a new twist or event. Every scene must have a purpose and be integral to the main story quest or plot. If you veer too far away from the core story conflict, readers will get lost or bored.

Map out your key scenes for Act One.
List only the location and "what happens."

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw a scene. Draw the central conflict or problem. Symbolize it in a centering object. What can you add to make the scene unique? What can you add to make it epic? What can you add to deepen character? Where is the flash of color? Where are the boundaries?

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Mapping it out *(Act Two)*

Act Two is where the plot thickens and the stakes are raised, often spanning 12 to 20 chapters and making up about 50% of your story. This act challenges the protagonist in profound ways, testing their resolve and pushing them toward significant growth.

If the Second Act goes too slowly, it might be because you're "stalling" until you can get to the exciting final scenes. You'll probably need to fill some chapters with subplots (stories that involve secondary characters). Also, remember to never let your characters get the carrot. Every time they try to do anything, throw stuff in their way.

They need to go get a pen, then find some paper, so they can leave a note. But the only pen is back at school. And they're out of gas. And there are zombies. So they take bicycles. But then the bicycles break. And the road is blocked. And someone catches on fire. And there's no water, and they're burnt so now they have to be carried. I like to add three obstacles for every goal; as well as three points of conflict for every scene.

Don't let your characters get what they want easily… keep it just out of reach. Keep inventing problems for them. It's OK for some of the problems to be random and accidental ("bad luck"), you just can't make the solutions random and accidental—your characters have to solve their own problems with wit and effort. If they only have one thing you need them to do, break that action down into twenty individual steps, then throw a wrench in each step. Also, don't make it all environmental or external.

Act Two is also about deepening relationships with your characters, as they get to know each other, and themselves. With all the stressful stuff going on, tempers are short, somebody is lying to the MC, the MC is hiding the truth from someone they care about, they are feeling guilty for something, they are (probably) confused by their conflicting feelings towards someone else. Each action scene is usually followed by a short scene of reflection and planning (they make a plan, they succeed or fail, then they make a new plan for the next

step). And often you'll want to alternate your scenes emotionally, so you'll have a positive, uplifting or peaceful scene followed by a devastating one.

Now that we've established the plot, the stakes and the world, we can slow down a bit. Before a very satisfying conclusion, we (and the protagonist) need to care deeply about the main characters, so this is a chance to make readers fall in love with them, before piling on more pain and chaos. Here are some things you can use to deepen the emotional bond and make them lovable:

- A secret
- A secret kindness
- What they do when they think nobody is watching
- An embarrassing mistake
- Something they find repulsive or hate (that they do anyway for someone else).
- Something they've never told anyone
- A memento or nostalgic keepsake
- An insecurity they hide
- Just being there (concern they try not to show)

But we also need to make sure we're motivating the protagonist. The final battle scenes will only make sense, if they *could* choose to walk away, but absolutely don't because they are completely committed. At first, they're just reacting or avoiding conflict. They have no idea what's going on. But then, they start to become personally invested, as the mystery deepens, probably in a way that's connected with their core identity.

- The first act was to hook interest, *what's happening*.

- The next part is… why is this happening *to me*?

Challenging events will prompt introspection and force commitment at the midpoint. In the second half of act two, things start heating up. Sidequests and incidental moments take the backseat to increasing difficulties, but now the protagonist is taking action to resolve their situation (it makes things worse, creating guilt and resolve). Their peers might be asking rational, plot-forwarding questions, like:

- ✓ Who is doing this, how do we stop it?
- ✓ What will they do next?

But the protagonist, still resistant, might be asking:

- ✓ How do I get out of this?
- ✓ How can I get back to normal?
- ✓ Am I enough?

The trick is that by the midpoint, new understanding leads to conviction, and escalating conflict leads to personality responsibility. Here's a handy list or flowchart of what it takes to create "peak drama."

1. Enough information to make an informed decision
2. Enough at stake to make a calculated risk
3. Enough responsibility to feel tragic guilt or loss
4. Vulnerable enough to be destroyed

In the first half of act two, we'll be exploring things and letting our protagonist find a sense of purpose and belonging; they'll be finding answers and gaining confidence. Here are some things you could add.

- Finding answers / learning the rules
- New rivals and frenemies
- Feeling inadequate / getting bullied
- Fighting for stability / acceptance
- Struggling autonomy or understanding
- Revealing the dangers and challenges
- Small trials and quests (motivations)
- Discovery goals (what's happening and why)
- *New* secrets to discover
- Struggle to prove themselves
- Lovable characters through vulnerable backstory
- Laughter and levity (world worth saving)
- The montage (incidental events that motivate)

PS. Some of these are just prompt ideas or writing tips, if you need more detail and explanation, look for it at this end of this guide.

In the second half of act two, things will pick up pace, but this is where you also need to be very careful about handling your twists and reveals, because it's not just about the calamitous events, it's about the surprises.

- Picking up steam/train wreck

- Broadening discomfort
- Investment/attachment
- Never guess the truth (defer knowledge)
- Show the opposite (surprise is the unexpected)
- External conflict reveals character flaws
- Profound realization leads to victory
- executing the plan
- battle scenes
- ticking clock (arbitrary countdown for reasons)
- big surprise (plot twists)
- non-literal battles
- deep near-admissions of feelings
- discovery quests revealing crucial information
- growing confidence and ability
- greater stakes increase anxiety and doubt
- flashbacks that show *why* this challenge is difficult

Subplots and Escalating Obstacles: Introduce subplots involving secondary characters to enrich the world and add complexity to the narrative. Each subplot should intertwine with the main plot to maintain coherence across the story. Escalate the protagonist's challenges—never allow them to achieve their goals easily. Invent creative obstacles that not only thwart their plans but also reveal deeper layers of their character.

Midpoint Reversal: The midpoint should serve as a significant reversal in the story, where the protagonist shifts from reactive to proactive. This often involves a major revelation or event that changes the protagonist's understanding of the stakes and their adversaries. It's a

pivot point that transforms the nature of the conflict and deepens the protagonist's commitment to their goal.

Character Development: Use the trials of Act Two to explore and expand the relationships among characters. Show how stress and conflict reveal hidden facets of personalities and alter dynamics. Include scenes of reflection after major events to give characters (and readers) a chance to breathe and reflect on the transformations occurring.

Map out your scenes for Act Two.
List only the location and "what happens."

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Mapping it out *(Act Three)*

Act Three brings your story to its climax and resolution, covering the final 25% of your manuscript with 10 to 20 chapters. This act focuses on resolving the conflicts introduced and solidifying the protagonist's transformations.

The Third Act will mostly cover the protagonist dealing with their loss or failure, feeling overwhelmed, getting a pep talk or finding a meaningful reason to persevere, formulating a new plan of action, and/or being forced into a final confrontation with the antagonist. They'll succeed, but they'll have to give something up (or at least be willing to). In the process, they are forever changed, and when they return to the ordinary world, everything is the same, but they are different.

The conclusion of your novel should feature:

1. Unlikely triumph through impossible action
2. nothing left to lose/conviction

All of the building conflicts or tensions, which have been sublimated, can creep out and wreak havoc in the third act. Use all your gunpowder. This is your last stand.

- A small fight that becomes a big fight. Little nuisances and sniping escalate into big fighting.
- Tempers build until people start saying how they really feel; the real truth slips out, or a cutting remark that can't be taken back.

- Anger leads to backstabbing; publicly revealing or sharing a devastating secret that blows up someone's life.
- This reveal sparks a slow-burn sideplot story that erupts. (oh, are we all sharing everything now? Well then…)
- Arguments escalate to a real emergency, accident or crisis. You've got to shut down the fight somehow, keeping tensions high without anyone backing down.
- That extra little push towards action.
- A cautionary tale makes the protagonist reconsider life choices and recognize fatal flaw.
- The slight win that shows what's possible; allowing a side character to get what they want.
- A meaningful memento of happy times, reflection on where they come from, what they're letting go, what they want.
- A reminder of what's important.
- An almost-action that fails. It's disappointing, and they learn they are still blocked by fear and resistance.
- Wise words of encouragement from an unexpected source.

Preparation and Climax: After overcoming the trials of Act Two, the protagonist prepares for the final confrontation. This part of the story should build towards the climax, where the protagonist faces their greatest challenge yet. It's a test of all they have learned and changed throughout the story.

Final Battle: The climax should be a compelling blend of action and emotion, where the protagonist confronts the antagonist or the central conflict head-on. The outcome should be uncertain; the protagonist should face real risk and make significant sacrifices to achieve their goals.

Denouement and Reflection: After the climax, the story should move into a phase of reflection and resolution. Show how the protagonist has been changed by their journey. This is also the time to tie up loose ends, resolve subplots, and provide closure to secondary arcs.

Epilogue: Consider adding an epilogue to give readers a glimpse of the protagonist's life after the main events of the story. It's an opportunity to reinforce the story's themes and show the long-term impacts of the protagonist's journey.

Map out your scenes for Act Three.

List only the location and “what happens.”

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Draw your Final Battle Scene again. Make it bigger, bolder. Make the setting distinctive and amazing. Draw the MC faltering, before coming back to triumph. What is the antagonist hoping to achieve? What does the MC need to learn/accept before their victory?

Draw a final “resolution” scene. Even if you don’t have a final chapter or two after the climax, you should draw a picture of what your MC does the day after. How do they feel? How are they treated by others?

A FLASH OF COLOR

When planning out your scenes, try and picture them like a photograph: where is everyone standing, what's the background look like, what's going on? Readers forget words, but they remember pictures and emotions. See if you can create a snapshot for each scene that will stick in their brains. You can draw it out if you wish (even if it's rough and ugly, nobody else has to see it.)

I recommend including:

1. Lots of light and dark contrast
2. Lots of color contrast
3. A humanizing element
4. A dash of color to focus your eye
5. Something that symbolizes the conflict in the scene

You don't need to get too detailed, but you do need to make choices. You're a guide in a dark room, and you're the one with the flashlight. Whatever you choose to shine the light on, will become the reader's experience of that setting or incident.

Is this a happy scene or a tragic one? Is it scary or funny? Drop a few objects in the environment that make readers feel the way you want them to. Figure out what your characters are wearing and what's driving the conflict. See if you can create *one* meaningful object that humanizes your protagonist, and potentially becomes an integral part of the story.

You might already have your scenes in mind—you know the basic setting or what happens. You may have described the characters and the action, and it might even be good. But it doesn't stick visually.

In every scene, you need to plant a red flag, which is what I call a 'plot anchor.' It's a bright bit of color that draws the eye. It helps readers focus on what's interesting and important about the scene. It doesn't have to be red, but it should be described in detail. If it's a black or white feather, the color of the feather will be described in such detail readers can't stop thinking about it.

For example, in one of my novels, the protagonist wears a colorful block of legos around her neck that reminds her of her dead brother; later she's forced to give it up to progress through the story quest.

In another, she wears a scrap of red ribbon that reminds her of her dead parents. She wears it as a bracelet until it gets replaced by a scrap of blue ribbon from a murdered girl (that makes her suspect her love interest). That way the ribbons represent her tragic past and future conflict; instead of sitting around thinking through her story questions, she can pull out the ribbons and have a tangible reminder of where she's come from and what she needs to face.

These objects can anchor the dangers and conflicts, so it's also a way of reminding readers what the stakes are. As an example, think of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. He could have just written a book about those characters, in those situations, and it would have been good. But he drew attention to the conflict of all those relationships, and he funneled the righteous judgment of Hester Prynne's peers, along with Hester's own shame and despair, into one bright symbol—**A**—a public badge, a visible reminder, a lens that focuses each scene.

It's OK to shift scenes around later, if you need to. That's one of the benefits of visualizing scenes like this; each scene should be instantly viewable in its entirety in one powerful image. It makes them unforgettable. That's what you're looking for. It doesn't have to be as

self-conscious or obvious as Hawthorne's, but try to think of something in each scene that deepens the characters or the conflict.

Special tip: Use your "flash of color" to make readers feel the mood you want them to feel in each scene. Find one object in each scene that's the most colorful, brightest thing in that scene.

Add a Flash of Color:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Show Don't Tell

Authors often struggle with this common piece of writing advice, but here is why this visual method to story-planning works so well. By drawing out your scenes, you're forced to ask "What does this look like?" If this was a movie or a play, what's happening right now on the stage or screen? Real plot action has movement and time progression. Whenever you are

sharing information directly to readers—'breaking the fourth wall'—you've hit the pause button on your characters.

You want scene description, backstory, infodumps and everything else to be happening on stage, in real time, through the lens of your characters' emotional reactions. You can also ask, "Who is saying this right now?" Are the characters aware of it, or is the author just talking to readers directly? In other words, is this a real scene, or a voiceover monologue?

Writing Scenes

If you're not sure where to actually begin writing your scenes, I like to use this framework:

- Regroup, new plan. thwart

This will keep things tightly-paced and moving forward. Each scene is about something happening; usually something unexpected. Things don't go as planned, and there is always new and unknown obstacles or challenges. Characters need to take a step back, react or pivot, formulate a new plan and try again, which will lead into the next crisis.

This works well because of another secret masterful storytelling, which is the art of the dramatic pause. When something happens—when you reach that pivotal point of new information, the surprise twist or reveal, that's when you should stop the scene.

If you continue, showing the characters reactions right away, or explaining things in more detail, the urgency and potency will fade and vanish. Use a hard scene break or chapter ending for these critical pieces, these Happenings. They can be events, realizations or confessions. They should have an emotional impact on your main characters and be unexpected. Try to write them as short and quick as possible.

Each scene should...

- either be a reaction, decision or dilemma
- have unresolved conflict
- something needs to change
- present new information

I could say a lot about scene description, but summarize a few things quickly: show what's different or unique about your setting or characters. Skip the cliché, flat descriptions. Don't say it was "just a typical high school gym, like all high school gyms everywhere." That tells us nothing. Show what is unusual or unexpected, in a way that reflects on the people or users.

Also, avoid metaphors or allegories—which are interruptions from your real scene. Get them to focus on one mental images, not several at the same time. Skip adverbs too, because they are telling: she laughed hysterically, is just using a symbol to tell readers how she laughed, it's not real scene description, it's a shorthand. Sometimes it's fine, but use it often enough and you aren't actually telling us anything. What does it *look like* to laugh hysterically?

Create Some Epic and Unique Settings for your Major Plot Points

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

CONFLICT MULTIPLIERS

Conflict doesn't just mean fight scenes or violence; it's the motor oil of your story. Drama is the emotional responses of your characters in response to conflict, but you need that friction and tension to generate momentum. You should add obstacles and barriers, in front of every mini-quest or task, to increase the conflict, while also raising the stakes by giving clear consequences or penalties.

You can boost conflict in order to reveal character traits, or you can add arbitrary prohibitions to create more pressure and opposition—before they just go do the thing, make it clear that thing is difficult, forbidden or dangerous. But that only works if your characters actually care about those punishments and have something to lose. How is your protagonist *feeling* about these events?

- doubt
- anger
- fear
- skepticism
- anger
- surprise
- prohibition

Keep in mind, you want to regulate the emotional turmoil, because if they are laughing and crying in the first few chapters, it'll be hard to make their emotions believable later on when they are hit with MUCH bigger conflict and drama. It's probably better to show their reactions to events, without a full-on emotional breakdown. You can't just show them fall to pieces after something happens, to tell readers how much they are hurting. First you have to

prove what it means to them, over a longer period of time, so when you take it away readers will feel the hurt without the dramatic outburst.

You can make your story more engaging by adding more conflict into every scene, or potential conflict that simmers under the surface. Here are the three kinds of conflict I like to use:

- Outer Conflict (threats)
- Challenges or obstacles that prevent the character from achieving goals.
- Inner Conflict (doubts)
- Moral struggles, decisions, guilt or shame, anger
- Friendly Fire (betrayal)
- Strong disagreements between allies or supporting characters.

But here's the big, important thing: conflict only works if the stakes are real and the outcome is unknown. This is why, you should be careful not to introduce too much "fake" conflict:

- This stuff happens (no big deal)
- This already happened (resolved conflict)
- This never really happened (false conflict)

The problem with infodumps, flashbacks or backstory, is that the conflict is resolved—it already happened. We can't discover anything new or unexpected in that scene. That's why they should be saved until much later in the story. For the same reason, it's a sign of weak writing to start with a dream sequence to show Big Exciting Things and then end with "and then she woke up."

Here are some final tips on creating more conflict:

- conflict between what *is* and what the protagonist *wants*
- conflict between what each of your characters want
- conflict between your protagonist's inner wants and external duties (this works really well with romance; budding attraction which, if expressed, would ruin everything and prevent her from her ultimate goal).
- foreboding or foreshadowing (something bad or evil is coming... give the readers a hint, even if the protagonist doesn't see it, readers will feel it.)

- ✓ What's the most surprising thing that could happen?
- ✓ What's the most visually stunning thing I can show?
- ✓ How could this hurt more? (physically, emotionally)

Now Let's Put It All Together!

Flip back to the "Plot Dot" chart, and map out your pivotal scenes on the next page; then add conflict, obstacles or challenges for each one.

Your 9 Key Scenes

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

- _____
- _____
- _____

Now Add More Conflict!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

- _____
- _____
- _____

TENSION & INTRIGUE

Even if you have a well-structured plot, and a bunch of real conflict, that's still not enough! There is one more secret strategy that keeps readers turning pages, and not everybody talks about it. This is more advanced, but it's a critical ingredient to riveting fiction.

Readers should want to find out what happens next. You need to cultivate the mystery by hiding information, not revealing it. If you overshare and explain what's going on and why all the characters are doing all the things, then we'll be left without any intrigue or suspense. Once you've figured out your story, you'll have to edit out all the infodumps and turn them into strong, powerful reveals.

Each necessary piece of information should resist discovery and be difficult to obtain. Before you give away easy answers, make your characters seek them out unsuccessfully at first, or linger on the questions. Show the missing information, define its shape, so that we'll recognize and identify its importance when it arrives.

The possibilities that may still happen and the explanations for why things are happening, should be left until closer to the end. You want to be *opening* doors, not closing them.

CONFLICT = what DOES happen.
TENSION = what COULD happen.
INTRIGUE = why is THIS happening?

This is why you should never have characters just sitting around and talking about everything, especially if it involves emotions or feelings. If everybody just talked things out, you'd remove all the tension with too much information.

Just as a character is about to express their feelings, reveal a critical piece of information, or take action that would resolve a story question or plot loop, interrupt them! Duct tape their mouths closed if you must. Allow a scathing remark to raise animosity and get their defenses up.

Intrigue: If readers aren't asking questions, they aren't interested. You get them interested by showing characters they care about, and revealing the dangers.

Tension: Let the risk and danger of actual conflict grow quietly. Don't let it out. Hold it in. Let it build until it *cannot* be contained.

Also, the best conflict is unplanned: so if you lay out the exact mission in detail and then they just… follow the plan… that will be boring. Don't have them guess or predict the thing that actually happens, because they need to be unprepared for it and if you tell readers what's coming, you'll take away the surprise.

Finally, save the scenes with the most emotional impact and make sure they are shown to readers and characters at the same time. Little bits of relevant information, filling in details, can be told second hand without a big reveal. But for the things that matter, we need to see and feel it.

INTRIGUE: withhold info

SUSPENSE: show the danger

TIMING: readers learn when characters learn

- Scenes of biggest drama should be shown
- ✓ not offstage or reported
- ✓ real conflict, not fake conflict)

This ties in with the backstory reveals we discussed earlier. All that background information about your world or characters, should be spread out and delivered in the slower in-between scenes, just before it becomes relevant: those details matter because they will establish why this challenge is impossible for this character, and why they persist even when it might destroy them.

It should come at a cost, so show them failing first. Have things go wrong in a tragic way. Show the lack or limitations, or them keeping secrets and avoiding questions, build it up before finally revealing it.

When to reveal backstory

Is this necessary to enjoy the story?

- ✓ after a risky or dangerous scene (slow after fast)
- ✓ with some action or scene (discovery or conversation)
- ✓ deepen emotional attachment (right before danger)
- ✓ justify character motivations (explain choices)

When to remove backstory:

Who is giving this information right now, and why?

X just thinking out loud to themselves
X telling someone who already knows
X overt narration while characters stand still

Story Reveal Cheatsheet

In the first 25% of the book, before you get to the point of no return, readers and characters should be asking ***what*** questions. What is even happening? What is this place? What is going to happen next?

At around 50%, this will change to ***who*** questions. Who is behind all this? Who can I trust? Who am I?

Finally, towards the end or around 75%, you'll have all the deep motivational reveals, either when the bad guy admits his evil plan and the reasons behind it; or after the major conflict when the danger has passed and you can finally let your characters sit down and fill each other in on the miscellaneous story details. These are the ***why*** questions.

	Ordinary World (start with lack)	
	Inciting Incident (call to adventure)	
WHAT	**1st Plot Point (point of no return)**	25%
	1st Pinch Point (first battle)	
WHO	**Midpoint (victim to warrior)**	50%
	2nd Pinch Point (second battle)	
WHY	**2nd Plot Point (dark night of soul)**	75%
	Final Battle (triumph-knowledge)	
	Epilogue (come home changed)	

Character Motivation

Plot holes are mostly about character motivation, which is the purpose of backstory flashbacks. You can identify them by asking these questions:

1. Why are the characters doing this?
2. Why does any of it matter?

To fix plot holes and gaps in logic or continuity, you can add urgency, fix the mood of the scene (bigger stakes require bigger justifications), show characters in a weak mental state, or raise concerns but have them dismissed. You need show *why* they don't do something easier, or nothing at all, or *why* they face clear challenges and what they expect and prepare for.

- Why don't they just…?
- Raise and dismiss

- Limited window
- Emotional consistency
- Relevance

Your protagonist needs to have a strong, consistent internal compass, and it needs to be revealed through incidents that establish their character. This is *who they are.* Without this reliable core identity, we won't be able to tell a story that forces them to change.

Plot holes are unfixable story questions that tear readers out of their suspended disbelief, and make them question and doubt the entire enterprise. If they're big enough, they'll throw the book across the room in frustration. Plot holes can be skipped over by entertaining plausible motivations or justifications for the characters' actions, and showing your work: what do they need to do next, what's their plan, what do they hope to achieve?

Stories are about character: making decisions are what creates our unique identities. Show the struggle to decide—that's who your character is, and what your story is about. Nobody is perfect, but their actions will be determined by their experiences, by who they are and what they've been through. They can be an irrational *mess*; but they will be consistent. Eventually you need to show how they got that way, and if it's your protagonist, find a way to improve. Conflict and stress can create turmoil that allows careful consideration to devolve into irrational, reckless behavior. *Provoke* them into making mistakes.

Add some backstory for your main characters

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Add some story questions for your 9 key scenes (what are your characters wondering about or trying to discover?)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

- _____
- _____

Add character motivation for your 9 key scenes: (what are your characters trying to do right now? What happens if they fail?)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

- _____
- _____

THE WRITING PROCESS

Having a map of your story, and having pictured the scenes in detail, will help with the writing process, but that doesn't mean it will be easy. Here are some final tips to help you finish writing your book.

1. Write the rough draft quickly. Don't edit, don't improve the writing, don't focus on the sentences. Just block in the conversation, setting and action in big chunks. If you get stuck, make a note and move on. Focus on hitting a certain word count, or getting through a scene a day, or even just opening your document for a twenty minute sprint.

2. Keep going until you get to the end. If you get stuck, go back to the beginning and start revising and cleaning things up. Every time you go through, you discover new things about your story and characters.

3. Get to the end. Clean it up enough to send to beta readers (or your mom), but keep focusing on the story, not the writing, until you're sure the story is enjoyable and satisfying.

4. Then start revising in earnest. Don't get discouraged that the writing may not be that great yet. Those sentences don't start to shine until the last few rounds of editing. I revise in three stages:

- What happens (basic flow of events)
- Why it happens (motivation and backstory)
- How it happens (description and visual cues).

5. Kill your darlings, which means, any sentence you're really proud of because it's such great writing probably needs to be cut. Readers don't want to be impressed with the writing if it distracts from the story. Stick with the story, use the words that convey the right images and emotions, but don't overdo it.

6. Writing is a learnable skill! You don't really understand what it takes to write a book until you've finished one, and even then, you're just a beginner. Be proud of yourself, but recognize you may need a professional editor, and also to finish several more books (probably both) before you start producing high quality work.

7. That said, "quality" isn't necessarily an indicator of commercial success. If you can't find an agent or publisher, don't be afraid to self-publish and get your work out there. Who knows what could happen.

8. Different genres have different expected lengths, but a normal first novel should be between 60K (young adult) and 90K (epic fantasy). If you're shooting for 60K and 30 chapters, each chapter will be around 2000 words—but that's just a rough estimate. Some will be longer or shorter. (Thrillers have short, tense scenes; epic fantasy or literary fiction can have more build up and description).

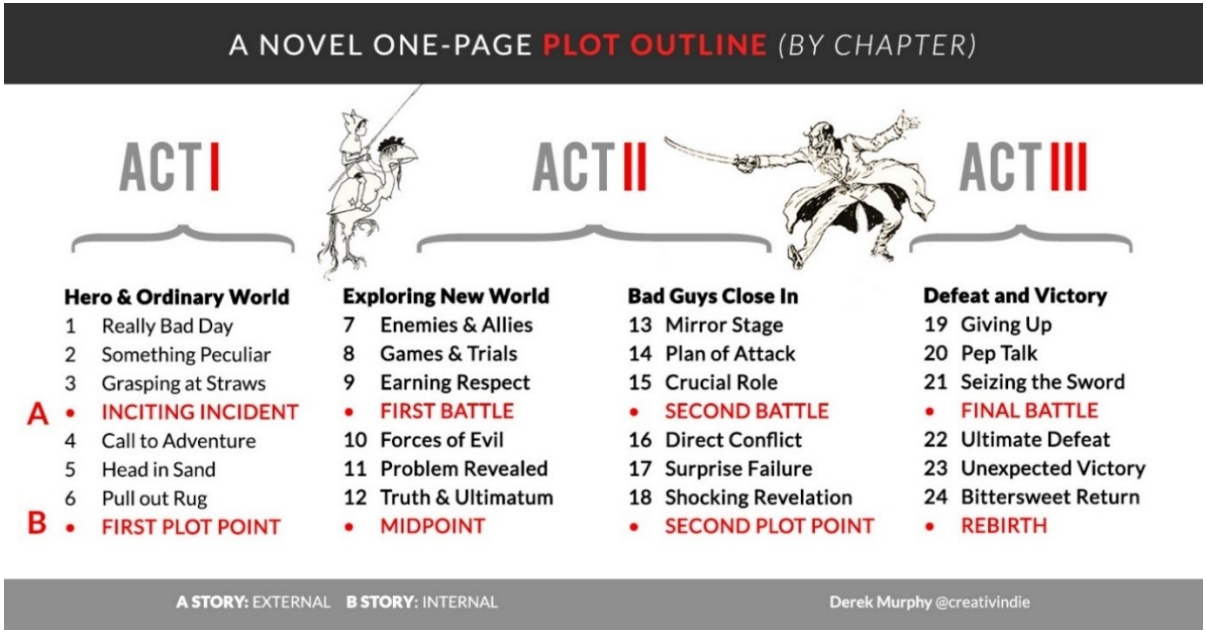
If you're writing something huge and are already at 300,000 words… everybody will tell you to cut half and then divide it into a trilogy, and they aren't wrong. You've probably got a lot of world-building and very little actual story. You might have a lot of neat stuff but none of it matters.

The first book doesn't have to finish the entire story, and you can use the 8 point structure for an entire series as well; but each book should also have those crucial turning points. I'd recommend writing your first draft fast, so you have some stuff down before trying to improve it. But once you're ready, here's a list of things that will help improve every scene. I use this during revisions and editing. It's a good idea to reflect on each chapter, notice what's missing, and then invent a way to way to make sure they are included.

- ✓ What happens
- ✓ Motivation (what do the characters need/want and why)
- ✓ The most pressing thing replaces the big thing
- ✓ What's stopping them? Opposition: 3 hurdles/obstacles
- ✓ Reaction, synthesis, action
- ✓ Change or Reveal (action or new info)
- ✓ 3x conflict (light the fuse: two irresolvable opposites that create friction)
- ✓ Tension (pull the string: unresolved story questions)
- ✓ Snapshot (picture it!)
- ✓ Momentum (urgency: why does this have to happen NOW?)
- ✓ Relevancy: Does this matter to the REAL story conflict or quest?
- ✓ Fulfilling the promise of the premise.
- ✓ End scene with unresolved conflict (cliffhanger)

The 24-Chapter Outline

This book began as a simple 8-point "Plot Dot" structure, which became pretty popular. Some writers LOVED the brevity and simplicity, but weren't sure about how to fill in all the spaces between these major turning points. I wanted to go deeper, so since then I've mapped out a 24-Chapter Outline that's even more detailed. People are finding it devastatingly effective.



"After years of cutting and pasting outlining strategies into something reasonably useful, I find you've simplified and created in one graphic everything I needed. The shifting terminology was frustrating, but your clearly worded descriptors after each point made the difference. If I'm ever asked to conduct another workshop on plotting, this is what I will reference."

"I would research and plan to avoid feelings of guilt from procrastination but never really started a project. With this outline I feel like any barriers have been removed. I have started writing again for the first time in years. Thank you for getting me back in the saddle."

I think the Plot Dot will be most effective starting out, to really nail your key scenes, but after that the 24-Chapter Outline is also very useful. I have a free novel-writing template you can download from my blog as well as an hour-long tutorial walking through each of the steps. Make sure to watch the free companion videos that go with this book; I made them a few years ago when we were in Colombia.

You can find all these resources here: www.creativindie.com/plot-outline

Author's Note

I wrote the first version of this booklet years ago in my parent's basement, after finishing a PhD in Literature and realizing I had no desire to join the academic community, writing stuffy research papers nobody else would read.

I created this updated version recently while on a writing retreat in a French chateau after publishing a dozen novels and selling over 100,000 books. You *can* make a living as a writer, but it's a lot easier if you respect your audience enough to learn your craft and deliver a quality reading experience.

This short guide will help you skip the overwhelm and get the basics in place quickly, but I've deliberately left out a bunch of the crucial, more advanced writing tips I've discovered.

The eight basic plot points will help you craft a balanced, satisfying novel. But it's not *enough.* After spending years as a developmental editor, I've found even "good" writers following an outline can still make critical mistakes. Often these center around conflict, suspense and tension. I spent several months coaching a team of writers, and trying to communicate exactly how to take a first rough draft and revise and edit it into winning book readers will love. It's usually a combination of:

- Adding conflict and tension
- Tightening the twists and reveals (without giving them away early)
- Increasing characters motivation and emotional stakes
- Adding scene description and detail
- Slowing down the battle scenes and increasing the emotional shock
- Fixing continuity issues (keeping track of props or objects)
- Removing redundancy and repetition

Luckily, these are things that can be easy to identify. Once you learn to notice your writing weaknesses and flag slow, boring or confusing scenes, you'll be able to create solutions—without spending thousands of dollars on a developmental editor.

I started making YouTube videos on the deeper, less obvious but absolutely critical writing tips, and they've gotten a few million views. Then I spent a lot of time on a new book on writing and tried to make it deeper, longer and more satisfying. I framed it around the theme of "Magic Words" and created a formula for powerful story:

- ✓ Razzle Dazzle (distract with action) 25% - WHAT
- ✓ Hocus Pocus (engage with fun weirdness) 50% - WHO
- ✓ Shazam (charge with energy) 75% - WHY
- ✓ Abracadabra (reveal the unexpected) 100% - WOW

Attention, distraction, expectation, fulfillment.

Writing well isn't something you can just learn in a day: it takes effort and practice. Which is why *Book Craft: The Art and Magic of Great Writing* is slow and tantalizing and makes you pay attention. It may not be a quick read, but it lingers. However, some people were outraged that it's too long and full of fluff and they just want the quick and easy stuff. So I took the most important writing tips and shared them here, because I wanted to make sure they were available to every writer. But if you need more help understanding some of the concepts and ideas I've shared, I hope you'll check out my other resources.

Now that I've written a too-short book and a too-long book on writing, maybe my next one will be just right. In the meantime, while I may not be perfect at communicating all of this

stuff, I am certain that it's fresh, unique and effective—and a lot of people seem to agree with me.

Even though I have a ton of free content, I know it's useful to get real support and feedback, so I try to make myself available for manuscript critiques or coaching. Be sure to follow me on YouTube, which is where I'll be sharing my next big series focusing on common writing mistakes and advanced revision and editing:

www.youtube.com/@DerekMurphycreativindie

PUBLISHING & BOOK MARKETING

Even if you manage book design and publishing, you may have trouble getting early reviews, building your author platform, or selling your book. I've written several books on publishing and book marketing, which you can claim for free!

- Book Marketing is Dead
- Write & Publish on a Budget
- Guerrilla Publishing

Get them here: www.creativindie.com/books